

# Grand Makeover Is Set for Maryland Strip City



Andrew Council for The New York Times

Rockville Pike, heading north.

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ROCKVILLE, Md. — Over the last century, Rockville Pike in Montgomery County, Md., has grown, unfettered and unplanned, into a sprawling strip city — a hodge-podge of shopping centers, parking lots and gridlocked traffic that frustrates motorists and discourages pedestrians.



Glatting Jackson

Above, a rendering of the White Flint plan, which seeks to create a walkable community.



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The area has been a bedroom community for Washington.

But now, a grand makeover is planned for one section of the pike, which begins as Wisconsin Avenue in Washington and is officially State Route 355, that would create a pedestrian boulevard using the principles of the “smart growth” movement. Planners say it could be a model for transforming clogged suburban arteries into livable, walkable communities with denser development and less sprawl, an improved quality of life and a healthier tax base.

The [project](#), called the White Flint Sector Plan, is a collaboration of major developers, planners, politicians and community groups whose interests are not often in sync. A partnership of six developers, normally competitors, got it off the ground.

“Developers got together three years ago and said ‘We can’t move forward unless we solve this traffic problem,’ ” said Rodney A. Lawrence, a principal of the JBG Companies. JBG, based in Chevy Chase, Md., is completing a 24-story apartment tower and retail complex known as North Bethesda Market, which was begun under a previous plan but is in line with the new one.

The White Flint plan, which is expected to take 20 to 25 years to complete, aims to create a new destination where residents live, dine, work and shop, all within walking distance. All together, there would be 9,800 new residential units and 5.69 million square feet of commercial space.

Developers will be allowed higher densities than current zoning permits, in return for providing more amenities and also by paying farmers in the county's 93,000-acre rural preserve to keep their land in agriculture. They would be required to finance infrastructure improvements through the creation of a tax district.

The county would seem to have the potential to support such a large-scale undertaking, with a population of nearly one million, up from 757,027 in the 1990 census. "Montgomery County has really been a bedroom community until recently," said Stephen Z. Kaufman, senior partner in Linowes & Blocher, a real estate law firm in Bethesda, Md. "Now it's really a linear city, and White Flint is one of those neighborhoods in the linear city."

The county council approved the White Flint plan March 23, but only after gaining the support of adjoining suburban neighborhoods worried about losing their leafy appeal among the new adjoining high-rises, which they feared would generate more traffic on their streets along with other urban problems.

"Some still don't want to see the scale of what's recommended, but not a majority," said Duchy Trachtenberg, a county council member who lives in Old Georgetown Village, a nearby 98-unit townhouse development. "Most are satisfied it will be staged appropriately. People are yearning for a sense of community. They're really looking forward to development of the boulevard."

In fact, though, the plan is not expected to decrease traffic but to shift it by creating more parallel roads and cross streets, and by making driving less appealing than mass transit. There will still be six traffic lanes, but bus rapid transit will run along a median strip between two existing Metro rail stations, from which it is about a 25-minute ride to downtown Washington.

Surface parking would be drastically reduced to 20 to 30 acres, from 161 acres today, while high-rise offices and apartment buildings will contain several levels of garage parking.

While it might seem folly to start such an ambitious plan in an uncertain economy, supporters say the time line works in their favor. "The nice thing," said Evan Goldman, director of development for Federal Realty, one of the partners, "is that it will be another year before we work out financing the infrastructure. That will allow the economy to improve before anyone has to pull the trigger."

But another obstacle may be that, despite the recession, many businesses along Rockville Pike remain very strong, said Mr. Lawrence of JBG. The challenge, he said, is “to incentivize people to take down viable businesses to do something greater, to give enough density to terminate leases and take a big bet on the future.”

The plan takes its name from White Flint Mall, which when it opened in 1977 was the Washington area’s most fashionable shopping destination, featuring a Bloomingdale’s and a Lord & Taylor.

The pike has long been a subject of citizen concerns. In 1895, county commissioners appropriated \$2,000 for its improvement. The road was reported in bad shape again in 1911 when citizens clamored for more repairs at a cost of \$25,000. That year, according to a report in The Washington Post of July 31, 1911, a driver received a ticket for going 30 miles an hour, a speed many motorists on the pike would be happy to reach today.

North Bethesda Market, the JBG development, is directly across Rockville Pike from the White Flint Mall, and has 187 units in the residential glass tower, the tallest building on the pike and “a model to show people what we’re going to do,” said Rollin Stanley, the county planning director. It will also have 210 low-rise units, a [Whole Foods Market](#), an LA Fitness center, an Arhaus furniture store, 90,000 square feet of shops and restaurants, and a plaza adorned with sculpture. Rents would range from \$1,570 for a studio to \$4,540 for some three-bedroom units.

Ms. Trachtenberg, raised on the Upper West Side of [Manhattan](#), said she was looking forward to the plan becoming reality. “I grew up being able to walk to the bake shop, library, a few blocks to get on the train,” she said. “Having grown up in a city environment, I always tease my husband our next home will be an apartment overlooking Rockville Pike.”